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# An African American's Pilgrimage to the Homeland: Roots, National Progress, and Personal Growth

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*I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me.*

Philippians 4:13

Imagine a 21-year-old African American male, a college student who has made many contributions to his college and surrounding community. He is proud to say that he is an African American—he is proud of his African heritage, but recognizes that he is much an American. He has always been curious about his African heritage, and wanted to have the chance to observe it. He knew that reading about his heritage was only giving a mere description of how rich the culture is. But one day he was offered the opportunity to go to the homeland where his ancestors once originated! That was me, and when I thought of how much of an opportunity it could be, and how much I could learn and grow, I could not refuse.

### Introduction

I was blessed with the opportunity to learn more about my cultural heritage by taking a six-week field study program in The Gambia, West Africa. What an adventure! I never imagined myself going to Africa. I knew that is where my African ancestors once lived, and I knew of the rich culture they had passed on through many generations. I cannot deny that I am an American, and as a typical American the

negative images that are viewed through the media shaped my perceptions of the people in Africa—and those negative images generated much fear of going. I cannot even begin to explain half of my incredible experience in this wonderful land. My hopes were to gain knowledge about this country, while at the same time understanding my cultural heritage. Before I left, I knew that Africa was a very hot continent, with multitudes living in poverty. Thanks to the media, I even believed that most people walked around naked, and that all Africans had a very dark skin color. It was amazing to me that many of my perceptions were wrong. Yes, Africans wore clothing like Americans, and there are different black skin tones just like we have in America. For example, in America there are



*Shawn waits to board the jet that will begin his journey to The Gambia.*



*Shawn standing with a Jola man at the International Roots Homecoming festivities at the president's village in Kanilia.*

many black people, but there are various skin tones, and there is not one skin tone that there is more of than the other.

I learned that as Americans we are really spoiled, and that many things that we consider necessities are really not required but desired. I remember going to Dr. Bill Roberts' office and asking him many questions that now that I look back, seem a bit ignorant. One day I asked him whether there were going to be bathroom facilities and running water. I asked these questions simply because I did not know. I have to say that Dr. Roberts was very patient with me, and did not show any anger when answering those questions. The media does an unjust job portraying the life in Africa. I was astonished at how modernized The Gambia was, in comparison to what I had seen and been taught about Africa before my arrival in the homeland. When I gave Dr. Roberts my final decision that I was going, he was very excited, and that is when he also informed me that I was the only male student going on the trip. Knowing that did not bother me at all, because most of my close friends are female. But for the six weeks we were in The Gambia I was considered the big brother for the females on the trip. As I look back, I did that role very well. There were many times that I pretended I was the husband or boyfriend of one of the females, to help them deal with numerous marriage proposals and invitations to homes by Gambian men.

Before and during this trip, there would be times that I had to rely on my Christian faith, and there were many times that I had to remember and recite inspirational scriptures, such as the passage I quoted in the beginning, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me," Philippians 4:13. This adventurous trip increased my faith in God most importantly. I have also increased my self-confidence, and I did things that at one time I would not have imagined myself doing.

## Finding A Topic

When we started brainstorming about our different projects, and what our interests were, I found it very difficult to choose. Being a political science major, with a concentration in African studies, I was primarily interested in African politics. I was also very interested in religion in The Gambia. I found it interesting that around 95% of all Africans in The Gambia were Muslims, with the remaining percentage Christian. I was interested in examining how religion influences politics in The Gambia, but as I talked with Gambians and tourists my interest in tourism expanded. Finally,

I decided to carry out a research project on tourism in The Gambia that focused on the International Roots Homecoming Festival.



*The mosque symbolizes the strength of the Muslim faith in The Gambia.*

## Research Methods

I researched this topic by learning about tourism in The Gambia and some of its problems. I learned much about my project by talking with various influential individuals in The Gambia who are knowledgeable in the tourism industry, and also in the history of the International Roots Homecoming festival. The International Roots Homecoming Festival is a very important festival, which benefits The Gambia in many ways. The Roots Homecoming Festival has been an annual event since 1996, designed to encourage people of African descent who reside within the Diaspora to further discover, reaffirm, and re-embrace their ancestral identity through confronting their physical past. It also benefits the attendees greatly by learning more of their African heritage and finding a connection to their homeland.

## Tourism in The Gambia

The Gambia is currently experiencing economic problems, and the greater the tourist population, the better off The Gambia will be. During my interview with Malik Jeng, he stated that The Gambia is the best tourist spot in West Africa and that one's first visit to West Africa should be in The Gambia. The good people of The Gambia have open arms for the tourists coming to visit their country, he said, and that is one thing that I will never forget. Tourism in The Gambia grew by

30% between 1994 and 1999 and contributes 18% of the country's GDP. The Gambia is fundamentally a "sun, sand and sea" destination, with a high level of foreign enclave monopoly ownership that dictates the prices, growth, direction and nature of tourism ([www.tourismconcern.org](http://www.tourismconcern.org)). My research indicates that the tourism industry started its formal operation some years ago. Before 1964, the only tourists who visited The Gambia utilized cruise boats that toured the West Coast of Africa, including The Gambia ([www.subuk.net/tourism.org](http://www.subuk.net/tourism.org)). These visits were mainly restricted to the capital, Banjul, which is why the earlier hotel facilities and tourism infrastructures were concentrated there. The 1970s can be called the years of expansion of tourism; The Gambia became a tourist destination for the Scandinavian people, mainly because of The Gambia being inexpensive—and more importantly an English-speaking country. Friendships developed between the tourists and the Gambian people, and helped the expansion in the tourism industry. This benefited the people of The Gambia in many ways. One significant way was increased employment, which contributed to the Gambians' income. Support services developed, such as horticultural production (fruits and vegetables), the provision of taxi services, painting, jewelry, and other arts and crafts. With the development of the tourism industry, the informal sector developed greatly, and was able to offer more to the tourist. The development of the tourism industry meant infrastructure growth as roads, telephone services, streetlights, utilities, and hotel training schools improved or were created. Currently, in the year 2000, The Gambia is still in the process of developing in many ways. The tourism sector has contributed to financial support of the country, and to making strong friendships with people



*Is it really any wonder this is called the 'smiling coast'? Meet Mami, receptionist at the Friendship Hotel.*

of other countries.

The Gambia is considered "the smiling coast," and in my interview with Malik Jeng we had a conversation about the logo changing in the near future. Malik is very knowledgeable about The Gambia; he currently works for West African tours, a very well known and respected tourism agency in The Gambia. When tourists see "the smiling coast," they think of a country with many friendly people. He wants the logo to change because he wants people to become more interested and aware of The Gambia's rich culture. There are many historical sites one can visit to learn more about the country—and which show that there is more to the country than friendly people. There are people that come to The Gambia for the sun and beach, but there are others who prefer to add some realism to their dream by spending some time in full touch with Gambian realities.



*Smiling Coast logo.*

### The Roots Homecoming Festival

The International Roots Homecoming Festival was the experience of a lifetime. I was able to bond with other people of African descent who were also getting to know more Africans and to learn more about African culture. It felt like a Thanksgiving or Christmas family gathering, but only larger. The Roots festival grew out of the work of the late great African American author, Alex Haley, who discovered his "roots" in the Gambian Village of Juffureh, and wrote a book which



later became a TV series known to millions as “Roots.” The theme of the millennium International Roots Homecoming Festival was “Building a bridge and sharing a vision for the development of Africa.” The festival ran from June 23rd to July 1st, and I attended most of the festival activities that week and had a wonderful time. I had an interview with the chairman of the national organizing committee, Momodou C. Joof. Mr. Joof said the goal of this festival is to make connections between the African and other African descendents in the Diaspora. It is true that every African American’s roots do not lie in The Gambia, but they do lie in Africa somewhere. The festival had many events, including the following: joint traditional & welcome fashion show, official opening ceremony preceded by a carnival of various national & international culture performances, African redemption day and cultural rite of passage at the village of Kanilia, musical jamboree, and mega-concert with local and international bands. A pilgrimage to Juffreh, the home of Kunta Kinteh, commemorated and honored the millions who died in slavery. There was a private sector investment forum and exposition, religious enlightenment, and lastly an African dinner, cultural variety night, and awards ceremony.



*A Fulani dance troupe at the opening ceremony of the Roots International Homecoming.*

The first event took place on Friday June 23rd at the King’s Club in Lamin. This was the Joint Welcome and traditional fashion show. I really had a great time; this was the first night that I was not around anyone that I came to The Gambia with. Initially I was a bit uncomfortable, but as the night passed I was just fine. I observed the many tourists there, and it reminded me of how my reactions were when I first arrived in The Gambia. By this time I had been in The Gambia for going on five weeks, I did not feel like a tourist

any longer—I felt I was a Gambian observing the attitudes of the many tourists in attendance. I felt the warm welcome once again from the people of The Gambia, and in return gave my warm thanks and proceeded to enjoy the evening. This night had a big significance to me as well as to the tourists that had arrived in the country just that day. This night I was introduced to the Secretary of State for Tourism and Culture, the Honorable Susan Waffa Ogoo. I was given a warm welcome as I expected, and she was especially surprised to know that I was in the country for almost a month at the time. The event had a late start, and a late ending, but it was truly a wonderful program. “Gambian time,” much like African Americans’ “CP (Colored people) time” meant there was a tendency for things to start later than originally planned, so I was not surprised at the delay.

On Saturday, June 24th, there was the official opening ceremony preceded by a carnival of cultural groups and “Rhulay Hutumba” (Day Lantern Parade). I would have to say that this was my absolute favorite event. It was held during the daytime, in contrast to the joint welcome and fashion show, which was held at night with very dim light. It was a wonderful day, until it started raining just before the next evening’s event. This official opening ceremony gave me the opportunity to speak with African Americans in attendance, and other people of African descent. I met a couple of women from the United Kingdom who have been coming to the Roots festival since it started in 1996. At this event we met a cultural group “African in motions” which is a group from Baltimore, Maryland. The group is directed by Brenda Brown, who is the dance instructor at Morgan State University in Baltimore. I found it amazing that I did not know these individuals at all, and that the first



*Brenda Brown with her African dance troupe (from Baltimore, Maryland) at the opening ceremony.*

time we met was in The Gambia, West Africa. At this event we heard from the president of the Republic of The Gambia, H.E Alhaji Dr. Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh. We heard from the secretary of state from Tourism and Culture, the Honorable Susan Waffa-Ogoo. We also heard greetings and welcome from the chairman of the national organizing committee, Momodou C. Joof. There was a section of the program when two prominent people of the Diaspora came to speak, and I was offered the opportunity to speak as a prominent speaker in the African American community. I thought about this offer for approximately ten minutes, and refused. To be honest, I did not feel that I was a prominent, meaning powerful, individual that could represent my entire African American race. The offer was very flattering, and if I was a selfish person and did not think, I might have said yes without hesitation.

On Monday, June 26th I went to Roots Day I, which was the pilgrimage to James Island, Juffureh/Albreda, including visits to the slavery museum and the matriarch, Mrs. Binta Kinteh, of the Kinteh Clan. Mrs. Binta Kinteh is a fifth generation descendant of Kunta Kinteh. I had already visited the site prior to the International Roots Homecoming festival. On June 26th I went there to mainly observe the people in attendance, and to visit the sites again. The reaction



*Shawn pictured with Alex Haley's (author of "Roots") fifth generation relative, Binta Kinteh.*



*Zimba, or lion dancers, at the Festival. This is a Wolof dance.*

of most of the people there in attendance was shock, and pure happiness. They were shocked to see many things that were before them, but happy that our ancestors stood and fought for future generations. The visit did not get too emotional until we visited James Island. James Island is an island in the River Gambia which bears the last remains of a slave fort where Africans were held captive before they were forcibly put into slave ships to embark on "a journey to hell." The boat ride back to the Banjul Wharf was a very quiet one. People were still in tears and shock over what they had just seen. The first time I was on James Island I had been quite emotional as well, going to a location where our ancestors once fought for their lives. It was unbearable to think about it. Just thinking of the pain they experienced was hard for me, and the fact they were taken away from their home to a new environment where they had absolutely no ties.

On Wednesday, June 28th was the African Redemption day (rites of passage, cultural dances and music) located in Kanilai, the home village of President Jammeh. The African Redemption day was a full day spent in a provincial village up river, intermingling with the local people. African names were given to brothers and sisters from the Diaspora who participated in the Futampaf initiation ceremony. They were given the opportunity to plant a tree in memory of their ancestral heritage, and herbalists and African spiritual healers were there for prayers and consultations. I was accompanied by staff of the various organizing committees, and I can remember that it was a long and hot day. I can remember seeing the many men that were taking part of the African Redemption day. According to my observations, they were very happy to be there, to learn more about





*Promoting friendship and fellowship, the Roots festival symbolizes Gambians' faith that tourism is part of the bridge they are building to a better future.*

their ancestral heritage. One word described my day at the African Redemption day at Kanilia village: "breathtaking." It was a spectacular day, and even with the very hot temperature, I had an experience that I will definitely never forget.

On Tuesday, June 27th, the investment forum and exposition was held at the Atlantic Hotel, Banjul. This investment forum and exposition helped me to become more aware of the financial difficulties that The Gambia is experiencing. In this investment forum they informed the participants of the International Roots Homecoming festival of the investment opportunities in The Gambia. One of the major investments in The Gambia is The Gambia Ports Authority, what promoters refer to as the gateway to West Africa. The Banjul port, the Gateway to West Africa, with its modern facilities, professional staff, and competitive prices prides itself as being one of the safest and most efficient ports within the African region. The port of Banjul is located on the estuary of the Gambia River, 26 nautical miles from the Atlantic Ocean. The realization of the Trade Gateway Project (which will seek to establish free zones for processing, packing, transshipment and distribution of goods), will be an important step in implementing the government's strategy of transforming the Gambian economy from an import basis to an export-oriented one. It will also consolidate its long-standing position as a regional trading and distribution center for international businesses wishing to access the untapped regional market. According to managing director Jangana, "the realization of the full potential and benefits of the gateway strategy will undoubtedly result in substantial increases in the volume of traffic passing through the

port. With these goals of expanding, it is important to get support from people that can help in this endeavor." On the same day, during the investment exposition, Donald Brown, a longtime supporter of The Gambia, encouraged visitors to help and invest in the wonderful country of The Gambia. Mr. Brown said that every little effort to help the country benefits the country, remarking that if you can just help one school child with school fees and supplies, it is a very big start.

This International Roots Homecoming festival also serves as a tool to promote tourism and for the Gambians to develop friendships among the participants of the festival. I observed that the International Roots Homecoming festival was not well attended, despite its potential. I suppose that there are many reasons for this, but the main reason, I believe, is that it was not well advertised, especially in the United States. Before I visited The Gambia, I did not know anything about the Roots Homecoming festival. When I first heard of the festival I was appalled! I did not know they had such a thing. The Gambia takes the tourism industry very seriously; they are aware that tourists coming to the country are not aware of the rich culture, and it is their desire to teach them, and to greet these tourists with open arms. Even though I did not feel like a tourist, I am still considered a tourist. As a tourist visiting their country I will be making an effort to support their country. I found that there is a shortage of books and other educational materials in the schools in The Gambia. This started my desire to plan to have a book drive to send books to The Gambia. In America, we have so many books that at times we have to throw them away or give them away. In The Gambia, sadly, they do not have that option. I think

that we take these precious items for granted because we don't have to worry about not having books or other educational resources.

## Conclusions and Personal Growth

This was truly the experience of a lifetime, and words cannot describe the experience I had. I proved so much to myself, and can say that I am very proud. It was amazing to identify some things in African culture that are very common in African American culture. I found out that friends and family are important in African culture, as well as African American culture. I really felt welcome in The Gambia, from the beginning. My initial reaction getting off the airplane and proceeding to our vehicle for transport to the hotel was "WOW!" First it was a little unbelievable that people could be that friendly and hospitable to people that come to visit their country. I honestly did not know what to think. I remember walking through the airport going to the van, and a nice gentleman at the door said to me, "I love you." Well, I was just speechless because I did not expect a man to tell me that, and I would not expect even a woman to tell me those three strong words. In America, people don't even want to say hello to you, so it was just a shock to me. There were times when I was sad, and angry, but most of the time I was happy. I was sad and angry because it seemed like

the first time I really started to understand what my ancestors went through. They fought a good fight to make sure that the present and future generations can walk through life, maybe with bumps, but without road blocks. I am truly grateful for what they have done, and that is why as an African American male I must walk through this rough world with pride and faith that things will be even better. Most importantly, this adventure increased my faith in God, and proved the scripture Philippians 4:13, I can do ALL things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

## Acknowledgements

I truly had a wonderful experience in The Gambia that I will never forget. I learned so many things about the people and culture of The Gambia, and learned so much about myself in those six weeks. I cannot conclude this article without thanking the many people who helped me achieve my goals in The Gambia. First of all, I want to thank all the lovely and friendly people in The Gambia who assisted me from the day I arrived to the day that I departed. There are several people that I want to thank individually; these people helped me in various ways, especially with my project. I want to thank Mr. Bakary Sidibe, who helped me with my project; he is very knowledgeable with the history of the International Roots Homecoming Festival. Mr.

Momodou C. Joof, who was the chairman of the National Organizing Committee for the festival, also assisted in guiding me with my project. I would like to thank Mr. Malik Jeng, who was helpful with getting information for my project. Lastly, there are two people who were there for me when I needed them; they helped me with my project, and also as mentors during the entire trip. Those two individuals were Bala Saho, and Professor Roberts; the two of them took the role as my big brother for the trip. They were absolutely terrific in helping me with my project, and helping me adjust to the different atmosphere in The Gambia. Thank you all!



*Shawn stands speechless after coming out of the slave dungeon at James Island.*





*One of the many masks at the Roots Festival.*



*A Roots festival dancer.*